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AUTHOR Sullivan, Howard J.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

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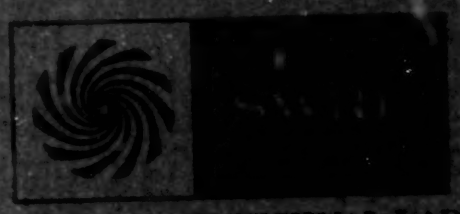

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DEVELOPMENT OF FIRST GRADERS' COMPOSITION SKILLS

Howard J. Sullivan, Masahito Okada and Fred C. Niedermeyer

ABSTRACT

As one step in the development of an instructional program designed to teach composition skills to primary-grade children, a tryout of approximately five months duration was conducted with first-grade children during the last five months of the 1969-70 school year. Fourteen classes used the composition program in conjunction with the SWRL Second-Year Communication Skills Program (SYCSP). At the end of the tryout, the story-writing performance of a random sample of children who used the composition program was compared with that of a comparable group of children who had used SYCSP without the composition program. Statistically significant differences favoring children who had used the composition program were obtained for judged quality of stories, story length, and punctuation and spelling performance.

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DEVELOPMENT OF FIRST GRADERS' COMPOSITION SKILLS[1]

Howard J. Sullivan, Masahito Okada and Fred C. Niedermeyer[2]

It is commonly acknowledged that many students have difficulty expressing themselves in writing. Perhaps one reason for this difficulty is that children are not provided with a sufficient number of appropriate composition opportunities. To become competent writers, children need a substantial amount of systematic instruction and practice. Facility and skill in composition, as in any other area, are normally attained only after considerable practice.

It seems desirable that children should begin to develop their composition ability early in their school career. Young children are imaginative and eager to communicate. By carefully structuring their writing experiences, it should be possible to increase considerably their fluency and skill in composition and to provide them with an early start toward becoming competent writers.

Properly sequenced instructional materials are a promising source for increasing the composition practice received by young children and for improving their writing skills. Unfortunately, few materials designed for progressive development of young children's composition skills are presently available. This dearth of suitable instructional materials undoubtedly limits the amount of appropriate writing practice that many primary-grade teachers are able to provide for their pupils. The primary goal of the Descriptive Writing activity in SWRL's Product Development Division is the development of an instructional program that improves the writing skills of primary-grade children. Development of a carefully sequenced set of materials for the first-grade portion of this program took place during the 1969-70 school year. The initial tryout of this portion of the program was conducted to determine the efficacy of the first-grade materials and to identify potential improvements in the materials.

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[1]A revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, February, 1971, and currently in press in Elementary English.

[2]The authors wish to express their appreciation for the contributions of Mrs. Marjorie Craig and the first-grade teachers from the San Diego City Schools who participated in the tryout described in this paper.

The first-grade composition program was developed to provide children with gradually increasing amounts of practice in writing descriptions and stories to accompany sequenced illustrations. The increase in the amount of writing required of the children was accompanied by a decrease in the amount of structure in the materials and writing task, until children ultimately were writing an entire story about a set of four sequenced illustrations. At the end of the school year, the story-writing performance of first-grade children who participated in the composition program in their regular classes was compared with the performance of comparable children who received the normal composition instruction in their classes. Performance of the two groups in writing an assigned story was compared and analyzed on the following criteria: quality of the stories as rated by a panel of judges; story and sentence length; and errors in capitalization, punctuation and spelling.

Method

Subjects

The composition program was developed for use with the SWRL Second-Year Communication Skills Program (SYCSP) being field tested during the 1969-70 school year with approximately 1200 first-grade children in 42 first-grade classes in three southwestern states. The composition program was included with SYCSP in all 14 classes from five schools in one large urban southern California school district participating in the SYCSP tryout. The program was not included for the remaining 28 classes in the SYCSP tryout. A total of 420 first-grade children in the 14 classes used the composition program.

To determine the effects of the program, end-of-program composition performance of students participating in the program was compared with the performance of a comparable group of children who participated in the SYCSP tryout but did not use the writing program. During the final two weeks of the 1969-70 school year, a story-writing task was assigned to children in four classes selected at random from among the 14 classes using the composition program. Four comparison classes that had not used the composition program were selected because their achievement in SYCSP was similar to the achievement of the four randomly selected classes that had used the composition program. These four comparison classes were assigned the same end-of-year story-writing task as the four classes from the composition program.

Because the test-scoring procedure involved a considerable amount of staff time, a random sample of 10 papers per class was selected for analysis. Thus, the final sample of students whose end-of-first-grade writing performance was analyzed consisted of 40 children (randomly selected from four classes on a 10 per class basis) of the 420 children who used the composition program and 40 children randomly selected from four comparable classes that did not use the program.

Materials

Sixty-four exercises were developed to provide the children with carefully sequenced practice on writing tasks that gradually increase in complexity. The initial exercises were two pages long and contained five sequenced illustrations and an accompanying story line. One or more words were missing from the sentences accompanying each illustration, and the child selected from among given choices the most appropriate word or words to complete each sentence. Children either circled their choice of words to complete each sentence or wrote the words directly into the sentences, depending upon the teacher's judgment of the child's ability to easily perform the handwriting task required. Subsequently, the exercises were increased to four pages in length and a maximum of 11 illustrations with accompanying incomplete story lines. Pupils were required to begin supplying their own words and phrases to complete the incomplete parts of the story, rather than having the words and phrases supplied for them. Gradually, one or more sentences were deleted for several illustrations, and each child wrote his own story line to accompany these illustrations. The final exercises in the program consisted of a sequence of four illustrations (one per page), and the child wrote the entire story to accompany the illustrations. Sample pages from two of the exercises, one from early in the program and one from late in the program, are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Each composition exercise was developed for use following a particular story in SYCSP. This procedure permitted use of the new words from each SYCSP reading story in the composition exercise that followed the story, thereby allowing for regular expansion of the written vocabulary used by the child in the composition exercises. Teachers were given written procedures for introducing and monitoring each exercise and for providing appropriate feedback to the children. The exercises were assigned as seat work to be completed by the children, and pupils were supplied with alphabetized word lists from the reading program to facilitate spelling and variety of word usage.

Sources of Data

The stories written by the children on the end-of-year composition test were the primary source of data in assessing the effectiveness of the composition program. A copy of the illustration shown in Figure 3 and standard oral instructions to write a story about the illustration were given to all children in the four randomly selected classes that had used the composition program and in the four comparison classes. The end-of-program composition test was administered to each class as an intact group at a single sitting. Although the composition classes had written stories about a sequence of four illustrations as part of the instructional program, the posttest was the first occasion on which they were asked to write a story about a single illustration.

Story 4

Name _____

The Fish

(Directions: Ask the children to write in the word that best describes the picture. If they cannot write, ask them to circle the word.)

1 Mat has a _____ (1) .

He _____ (2) a fish.

1 net hat

2 fills wants

2 Mat is _____ (1) .

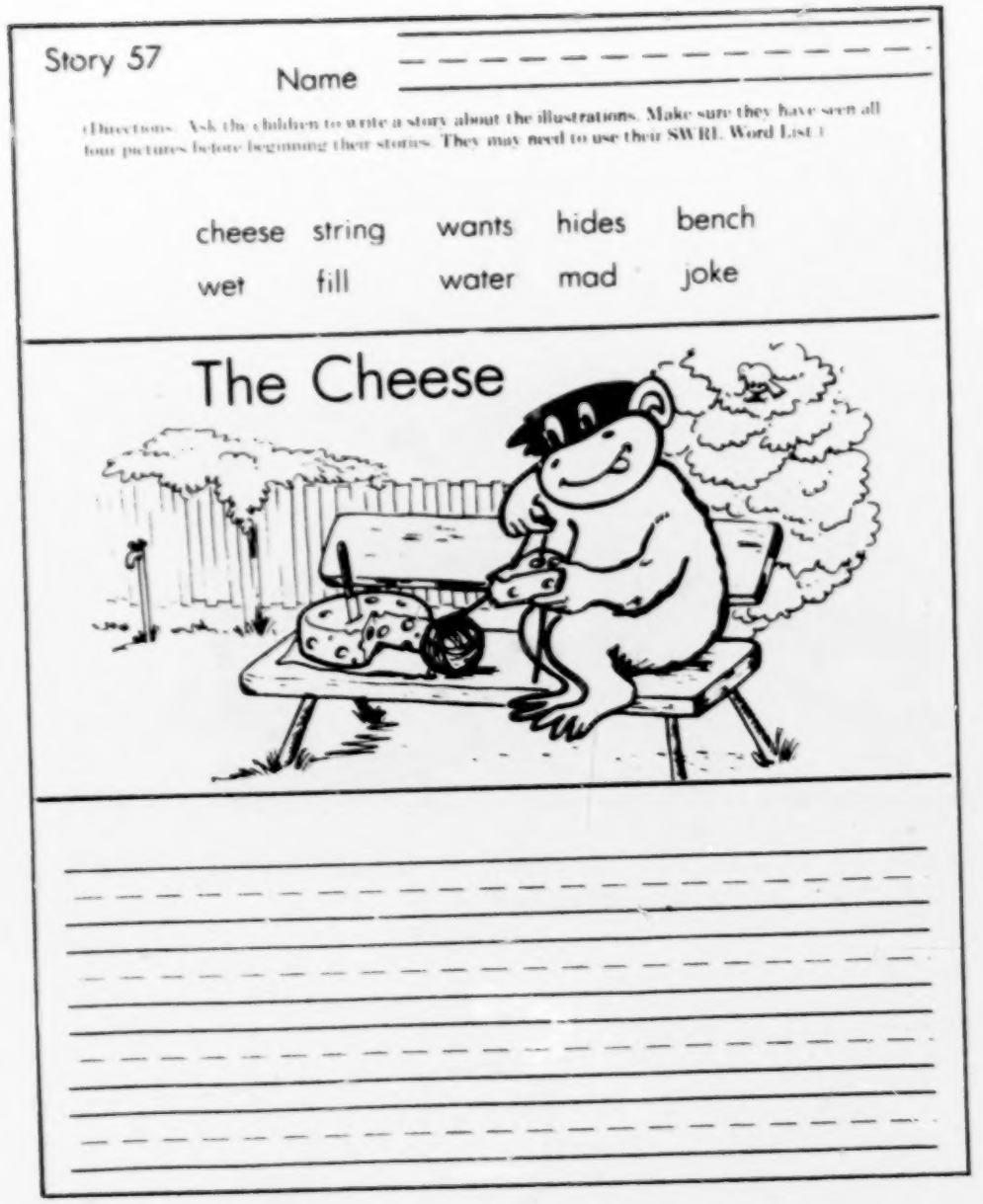
He has the _____ (2) .

1 wet set

2 fish cat

Figure 1. Sample Page from Two-page Exercise near Beginning of Grade 1 Program*

*The sample pages shown in Figures 1 and 2 were reduced from the original 8½" x 11" exercises. The two-page exercise illustrated in Figure 1 and similar exercises from early in the program contained a total of five illustrations showing a sequenced series of events. Each illustration was accompanied by a story line written in the limited reading vocabulary of the children.


Story 57 Name _____

(Directions: Ask the children to write a story about the illustrations. Make sure they have seen all four pictures before beginning their stories. They may need to use their SWRL Word List.)

cheese string wants hides bench
wet fill water mad joke

The Cheese

Figure 2. Sample Page from Four-page Exercise near End of Grade 1 Program*

*The four illustrations (one per page) in the exercise illustrated in Figure 2 showed a related series of events and the child wrote the entire story about the series of illustrations. The words at the top of the page in Figure 2 are key words (provided to facilitate spelling) that the child may wish to use.

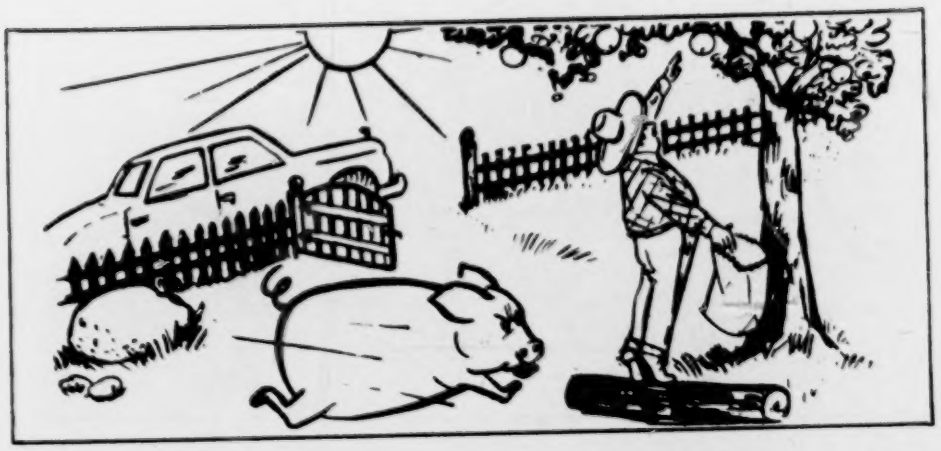


Figure 3. Illustration Used as Basis for Children's Posttest Stories*

*Each child was given a copy of the illustration in Figure 3 along with standard oral instructions to write a story about the picture.

The stories that children wrote on the posttest were analyzed on several objective criteria and were also judged on the basis of overall quality. The objective criteria included story and sentence length, frequency of certain types of punctuation errors, and frequency of spelling errors. The ratings on overall quality were obtained on each story from a panel of four judges: a writer of children's stories, a professional editor, a primary-grade teacher, and a high school English teacher. All posttest stories were mixed together prior to the ratings, and each test was rated from 1 (high) to 5 (low) by each judge without knowledge of the ratings assigned by other judges or of whether the child who wrote it had participated in the composition program. The average intercorrelation between judges on the 80 posttest stories (10 per class) included in the data analysis was .76.

In addition to the posttest data, information about the exercises in the composition program was obtained on a brief log sheet maintained by each teacher. On these sheets teachers recorded their estimates of the interest and difficulty levels of each exercise and the amount of time required for completion of the exercise. Teachers indicated their general reactions to the program on an end-of-program questionnaire, and periodic classroom visits were made during the study to observe classroom use of the program.

Results

Table 1 shows the mean quality ratings by the panel of judges for the stories and the mean frequency counts by group for the criteria used in analyzing the posttest stories. For each variable listed in the table, a *t*-test was employed to analyze the significance of the difference between the mean score of pupils from the writing program and the mean score of comparison pupils. The obtained *t*-ratios and the level of statistical significance of each *t*-ratio are shown in the two right-hand columns in Table 1.

It can be seen from the table that the panel of judges assigned higher ratings to the stories written by pupils who participated in the composition program than to pupils who were not in the program. The difference between the mean rating of 2.89 for the stories written by pupils from the composition classes and the rating of 3.70 for pupils from the comparison classes was statistically significant at the .01 level of confidence.

Table 1 also reveals that pupils from the composition program wrote longer stories and more sentences and made a smaller proportion of punctuation and spelling errors than did the comparison pupils. On six of the eight variables listed in the table, the difference between the two groups was statistically significant beyond the .05 level of confidence. Particularly striking is the difference in the average length of the stories written by pupils in the two groups. The stories written by the children from the composition program were nearly three times as long

TABLE 1

Ratings and Objective Data on Posttest Stories

Variable	Mean Scores by Group* Pupils in Composition Program	Comparison Pupils	t-ratio	Significance level
JUDGED OVERALL QUALITY**	2.89	3.70	4.50	p<.01
STORY AND SENTENCE LENGTH				
Total words in story	71.4	24.8	8.48	p<.001
Number of sentences	9.1	3.0	5.72	p<.01
Words per sentence	8.0	6.9	.80	Not Significant
PUNCTUATION ERRORS***				
Capitals omitted	.31	.39	.80	Not significant
Capitals used erroneously	.04	.19	3.07	p<.05
Improper ending punctuation	.26	.53	3.04	p<.05
SPELLING ERRORS***	.07	.18	4.48	p<.01

*The data in these columns reflect the mean scores of the 40 children selected at random on a 10 per class basis from four classes in the composition program and the 40 children selected at random from the four comparison classes. The class was the unit of analysis for all significance tests.

**This row shows the mean ratings for the 40 stories from each group. Each story was assigned a rating from 1 (high) to 5 (low) by each judge.

***For punctuation and spelling errors, the mean scores show the proportion of errors out of all possible errors. For example, the "capitals omitted" row indicates that capitals were not used when they should have been used 31% of the time by pupils who were in the composition program and 39% of the time by the comparison pupils. Similarly, the "spelling errors" row indicates that pupils from the composition program misspelled 7% of all words they used, whereas comparison pupils misspelled 18% of the words they used.

(71.4 words to 24.8 words) as the stories written by pupils from the comparison classes.

Information from the log sheets maintained by teachers revealed that the amount of time required for pupils to complete the composition exercises averaged 10 minutes per exercise for the entire program, increasing gradually from about six minutes per exercise early in the program to approximately 15 minutes per exercise during the final portion of the program. Teacher ratings on the log sheets and end-of-program questionnaire indicated that the teachers felt the exercises were of moderate difficulty and sustained a high level of pupil interest.

Discussion

In considering the effects of the composition program used in the present study, it is especially important to note one particular characteristic of the program. An exercise requiring writing practice by the pupils was intentionally included as a basic activity for each lesson in the program. Inclusion of the pupil materials and writing practice for each lesson was considered to be an important feature of the program. Previous experiences of the experimenters in tryouts of instructional materials have indicated that teachers are much more likely to conduct a suggested activity when pupil materials are provided for the activity than when the activity is simply described but no pupil materials are required or provided. In addition, the pupil materials can be developed to require a gradually increasing amount of writing from the children and to provide an interesting succession of topics and illustrations for the children to write about. The structure that carefully sequenced pupil materials provide for both the pupils and the teacher appears to be an important aspect of a beginning composition program for young children.

The results of the study indicate that a carefully designed program can substantially improve certain composition skills of first-grade children. However, the number and level of skills that can be developed in a composition program for first graders are severely limited by the amount of time available for instruction and by the intellectual and handwriting capabilities of the children. Because of the limited instructional time and competence levels of first-grade children, the primary focus of the composition program used in the study was restricted to development of greater fluency in the writing of descriptions and stories. Increased skill in writing mechanics and spelling was apparently an additional result of the practice provided by the program and the concomitant monitoring and feedback procedures used by the teachers.

Improvements of children's skills in expressing themselves in writing is an important educational goal. The positive results obtained with first-grade children in the study reported in this paper offer encouragement for the development of a more comprehensive program extending upward

in the elementary grades. On the basis of the results obtained in the present tryout, revisions will be made in the first-grade portion of the composition program and the development of the program will be extended to the mid-elementary level. The expanded program will include systematic instruction and practice in several types of writing and in such techniques as the use of descriptive words and phrases, variety in sentence structure, inter-sentence and inter-paragraph continuity, and proper procedures for planning and organizing any writing effort. The sequenced writing experiences provided in an elementary school program of this type should result in continuous improvement of children's writing skills.